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ABSTRACT

This report contains: an address by Kenneth E. Young, "Evaluating Educational Quality: the Central but Changed Role of Accreditation:" and summaries of the concurrent sessions on nontraditional baccalaureate degree-awarding institutions and programs; nontraditional graduate degree-awarding institutions and programs; and a report on the general session. Conference participants are also listed. (MH)

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PROCEEDINGS

Conference on Assessing Nontraditional Education

Sponsored by

The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation

Philadelphia Marriott Hotel
April 6-7, 1979

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- Conference Program
- Keynote Address
- Summary Reports
- List of Participants

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AGENDA

Assessing Nontraditional Education

Philadelphia Marriott Hotel
April 6-7, 1979

Friday, April 6

6:30 p.m. — Registration and Reception - Salon K

7:45 p.m. — Dinner - Salon L

8:30 p.m. — Address: "Evaluating Educational Quality -- the Central but Changed Role for Accreditation"

Kenneth E. Young, President, The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, Washington, DC

9:00 p.m. — Adjourn first session

Saturday, April 7

8:30 a.m. — General Session - Salon K

Project Overview: Grover J. Andrews, Project Director and Associate Executive Secretary, Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Atlanta, Georgia

9:15 a.m. — Concurrent Sessions - Meeting rooms: Boston, Dallas, Chicago

1. Nontraditional nondegree institutions and programs - Boston
   - Philip McCullough, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
2. Nontraditional baccalaureate degree-awarding institutions and programs - Dallas
   - John Harris, Middle Tennessee State University
   - Patricia Thrash, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
3. Nontraditional graduate degree-awarding institutions and programs - Chicago
   - Grover Andrews
   - Kay Andersen, Western Association of Schools and Colleges

10:30 a.m. — Refreshment Break

11:00 a.m. — Continue Concurrent Sessions: Record reactions to the recommendations

12:15 p.m. Lunch (on your own)

1:30 p.m. General Session - Salon K

Implications for Accreditation: Brief report of reactions recorded in morning sessions, to be followed by a panel discussion with audience participation of the implications for accreditation emanating from the study

Panel:

- Patricia Thrash, presiding
- Kay Andersen
- Grover Andrews
- Robert Kirkwood, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
- Kenneth E. Young

3:00 p.m. Adjourn

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Evaluating Educational Quality: The Central But Changed Role of Accreditation

Kenneth E. Young
President
Council on Postsecondary Accreditation

Remember the professor of economics who always had the same questions on his final examination? He was asked, "Why don't you change the questions?" And his answer was, "In economics, the questions always remain the same. It's the answers that change."

We face a somewhat similar situation in higher education. Over the years, the important questions have not really changed. They are, as implied by the title of this presentation:

- What is higher education? Or, more specifically, what is an institution of higher education?
- What constitutes educational quality?
- How can we best evaluate educational effectiveness?

We have been asking those same questions, or variants of them, since a little preparatory school/quasi-college called Harvard first appeared upon the scene in 1636. But as years passed and times changed, the answers to those questions also have changed.

Take, for example, the question, "What is an institution of higher education?" For hundreds of years, in this country there was but a single answer to that question. We had just one kind of institution -- what I would call the Old American Liberal Arts College. Then in the mid-1800's we saw the beginnings of the land-grant colleges, state-supported institutions, the university (which didn't become a reality until the founding of the Johns Hopkins University in 1876). Then in rapid succession the community college movement, statewide systems of institutions, the concept of postsecondary education (which became "official" with the Education Amendments of 1972), and -- of course -- the development of something called nontraditional education.

Thus across time, our answer to the question, "What is an institution of higher education?" has changed. Now we have the Rand Corporation's Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Santa Monica, Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City, and the Community College of the Air Force in San Antonio all offering degrees. And if we look at the nondegree sector, we find the Xerox Learning Center in Virginia, McDonald's Hamburger University in Illinois, the Westlawn School of Art Design (a correspondence school in California), the Gemological Institute of America, and the New York School of Dog Grooming. All of these institutions -- and many more -- are part of the postsecondary education scene in the United States.

The changing answer to the question, "What is an institution of higher or postsecondary education?" involves more than acknowledging the development of new kinds of institutions. Major changes also have been occurring in so-called traditional higher education. Distinguished institutions, long-established institutions, institutions represented in this room, are vigorously seeking out new student clienteles, they are introducing new curricula, they are initiating new approaches to teaching and learning. Credit is being given for work, for service experience, for self-study, for travel. Institutions also are expanding physically; satellite campuses operate all over the country -- in fact, all over the world.

Given the eclecticism, the catholicism (with a small "c") that one finds, I challenge any one in this room to write -- in 25 words or less -- a useful, accurate, comprehensive definition of an institution of postsecondary education. My best effort would be as follows:

An institution of postsecondary education is one that:

- Has education as its major purpose.
- Primarily serves students beyond the high school-leaving age.
- Is legally authorized by government (state or federal).
- Has achieved or is seeking accreditation.

This definition leaves out thousands of institutions that are not accredited (including an estimated 8,000 proprietary schools). It also omits an uncalculated number of education and training programs sponsored by business and industry, labor unions, various levels of government, and voluntary associations. (By the way, there is another thing wrong with my definition; it runs more than 25 words.)

The point is that accreditation is now expected to evaluate and assure the educational quality of everything from a one-man school of welding to a statewide system of postsecondary education, from a hospital with training programs to a state agency offering degrees by examination, from institutions that operate campuses all over the world to institutions that have no campus at all. Surely no social enterprise in history has faced such a dramatic expansion of and change in its "universe" in such a relatively short period of time as has educational accreditation. Accreditation is supposed to attest to the "quality" of all of these "educational institutions."

In his book, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Rebert Pirsig tells the story of a man's quest after the meaning of that elusive concept -- quality. The seeker finally learns, as all of us must, that quality (also love and beauty and other ephemeral phenomena) cannot be precisely defined. Nor can quality be exactly measured. We almost always can recognize it, however, when we come across it. Accreditation is an organized way for higher education not only to recognize and acknowledge quality but also to encourage practices that are more likely to lead to the development of quality.

There was a time when accreditation served essentially as a set of renewable membership standards for admission to a "private club" of likeminded institutions. An institution underwent periodic examination (usually every ten years) by a group of peers from similar institutions, who determined that the applicant college or university (which offered comparable programs and degrees to comparable students) had appropriate facilities, finances, staffing, and learning conditions presumed to be necessary for such purposes. Accreditation has moved a long way from that approach.

Accreditation currently focuses on two concerns: educational quality, defined and interpreted within the context of the institution or program's statement of its own scope and purpose as compared with similar institutions and programs; and institutional integrity, viewed from the perspective that the institution or program is what it says it is and does what it says it does educationally, at any given point in time.

Educational quality is evaluated and encouraged by looking at conditions that are believed to be necessary and desirable to assure such quality and evidence, to the extent that it is available, that the institution or program does indeed produce educational quality.

Basic to the accreditation process, of course, are the institutional self-study, a comprehensive effort to assess the effectiveness of an institution or program in the light of its publicly stated objectives, involving a broad cross-section of the institution or program's constituencies; and peer evaluation, expert judgment from outside the institution, usually consisting of professional educators (faculty members as well as administrators), certain specialists according to the nature of the institution or program, and sometimes others representing specific public interests.

Currently, then, accreditation at the postsecondary level is intended to foster excellence in postsecondary education through the development of criteria and guidelines for assessing educational effectiveness; encourage improvement through continuous self-study and planning; and assure the educational community, the general public, and other agencies or organizations that an institution or program has both clearly defined and appropriate objectives, maintains conditions under which their achievement can reasonably be expected, appears in fact to be accomplishing them substantially, and can be expected to continue to do so. Accreditation also provides counsel and assistance to established and developing institutions and programs, encourages the diversity of American postsecondary education, and allows institutions to achieve their particular objectives and goals, and endeavors to protect institutions against encroachments that might jeopardize their educational effectiveness or academic freedom.

The accreditation process is designed primarily to encourage and assist the institution with its evaluation of itself and then to validate what the institution says about itself. The criteria of the accrediting body (although there are some variations in this) are intended to establish a

common frame of reference for the institutional self-study and the peer review, and not to impose rigid, external, quantitative requirements on the institution.

Accreditation continues to evolve. We are moving into a time when institutions, for their own purposes (survival) as well as for socially induced reasons (accountability, consumer information), will engage in a continuing process of self-evaluation. This evaluative process will center on more explicit statements of expected educational outcomes - i.e., colleges and universities will be expected to ask and answer what it is, specifically, that they are about as educational institutions, and how they know that they are achieving their objectives.

Such an approach calls for the development of statements of educational outcomes that are clear and precise and that lend themselves to evaluation. This does not necessarily mean measurement, because some of the most important outcomes of the teaching-learning process cannot easily be measured. However, they can be evaluated; there are a variety of ways, through both internal and external evaluation, to determine whether an institution is accomplishing what it set out to accomplish.

Once an institution states its expected educational outcomes in ways that lend themselves to evaluation and institutes an ongoing process for evaluating its success in achieving these objectives, then a number of interesting possibilities suggest themselves. An institution should be able to get a much faster and more accurate reading on what it is doing and not doing, and this is going to prove increasingly necessary in the difficult times ahead. Furthermore, an institution will be able to produce an annual statement describing its educational condition, much as it reports annually on its financial status. This idea was proposed as part of the concept of "educational auditing." It also makes it possible to provide students with accurate, up-to-date, helpful information, along the lines suggested by the Better Information for Student Choice project. An institution also should find it possible to use essentially the same information as the basis for annual reports to the appropriate accrediting bodies. Such annual reports could be monitored by the accrediting bodies, supplemented by staff visits as necessary. Carried to its ultimate, this approach could reduce the necessity for putting together elaborate visiting teams. Teams could be assembled only when the reports and staff visits suggest problems, and then a team could be selected to focus on the special problem or problems. With this approach, the accrediting organization would function more as a validating body, saying to the world, "What this institution claims about itself is accurate, reliable, valid information, relating directly to its statement of objectives."

COPA has been moving toward this ideal since its beginnings a little over four years ago. One of the first steps was a project, Assessment in Terms of Outcomes Through Institutional Self-Study, initiated by Robert Kirkwood and the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commission of Higher Education with funding from the Danforth Foundation and directed by Norman Burns. COPA assumed sponsorship of that project. That in turn led to yet another project, Developing Criteria and Procedures for the Accreditation of Nontraditional Education, the results of which we are gathered here to discuss. (Grover Andrews)

Anticipating the completion of that project, COPA themed its summer conference around the topic, Evaluating Educational Quality, and the major presentations from that conference were published in an occasional paper by the same title. They included:

- The keynote address by Alexander W. Astin, "Student-Oriented Management: A Proposal for Change."

- A discussion paper by Howard W. Bowen, "Goals, Outcomes, and Academic Evaluation."

- A conference synthesis by Charles W. Chambers, "What Have We Learned."

Overall, the conference affirmed that the measurement of outcomes not only is desirable but is essential if postsecondary education is to gain a better understanding of quality factors in institutions and programs. Indeed, outcome approaches go far beyond accreditation's focus on the evaluation of educational quality and are viewed by many as central to the planning, design, and operation of sound educational activities. Thus, by measuring outcomes, accreditation would become an integrated part of the entire educational process rather than an ad hoc diagnostic tool brought in from outside the institution.

The symmetry which outcomes assessment offers both to the establishment and to the evaluation of educational activities would greatly enhance the efficiency, consistency, and reliability of accreditation. As a bonus, if it were based on outcomes, accreditation would directly reflect the accomplishments of the educational process and would be heavily relied on in reporting and accounting to various constituencies and users.

Finally, I will close with a quotation from Arthur W. Chickering, who in his book, Education and Indentity, wrote:

The major task confronting higher education is not to generate new, complex, and subtle understandings, but to act on knowledge already available, to recognize principles of learning and human development already clearly established. The gap between what is known and what is done must be narrowed. Educational problems are outrunning solutions, not so much for lack of relevant principles, and not because useful steps are obscure, but because implementation is occurring at a snail's pace, because basic concepts are disdained.

Report on Concurrent Session:
Nontraditional Baccalaureate Degree-awarding
Institutions and Programs
(Kevin E. Kearney, Recorder)

I. Principal observations of John Harris regarding accrediting processes:

- When a visiting team is sent to a school, a clear statement of the purpose of the visit is not always available.
- Visiting committee reports seem to affirm all purposes for all institutions; perhaps more evaluation needed.
- Review committee reports are often descriptive and cursory rather than evaluative and systematic.
- Visiting teams seem too preoccupied with fiscal analysis as compared with other evaluative criteria such as "What is the meaning of the degree?"
- Too much improvement advice is dispensed in these reports; there needs to be more judgment exercised and recorded. Improvement advice can become license for being indefinite about what was never really made clear or brought into focus.
- Accreditation may be insensitive to pluralistic forms of education. For example, in institutions that are in part offshoots of the phenomena of economic systems, will academic freedom be constrained by dollar interests?
- Accrediting policies are couched in vague language. Guidelines for self-study should be written so that institutions will be on the line to:

  List the degrees

  Set forth the requirements for said credentials (explicit statement about meaning of degree)

  Indicate the methods for determining that these requirements have been met (emphasis on outcomes)

(Note: The speaker concentrated on concerns related to accrediting practices rather than such practices as applied to nontraditional study per se.)

II. Reactions to the COPA project recommendations:

- There was a negative reaction to Recommendation Three (p. 23 of the Summary of the Project Report):

"That postsecondary educational institutions that develop nontraditional educational programs assume the responsibility to do so with quality. That they not begin nontraditional programs until they have achieved (1) administration and faculty commitment to alternative approaches to education that are appropriate to the institution's purpose and mission, (2) appropriate authorization from governing and faculty approval bodies, (3) a fully developed curriculum, and (4) adequate educational and financial resources for successful implementation."

The recommendation seems to put more pressure on nontraditional programs than on others. Why highlight nontraditional education as different when the central question should be, "How do we accredit educational programs?"

The group also seemed to feel that if every nontraditional program had to measure up to these criteria before they began, very few if any would ever get started.

- One respondent took exception to Paul Dressel's statement (on page 17 of the Project Report cited above) describing the point at which "the major problems of recognizing and accrediting such degree arises."

- The recommendations fall short because of "something left out." Evaluation of an institution has to start with the administration. More specifically, the question needs to be asked, "What is being done to stimulate or provide motivation for teacher development?"

- Reactions that amount to editing suggestions:

  Language should be changed to edit out a bias against small institutions.

  Statements that reflect overreaction against profit motive seem too judgmental and should be softened.

  The language of the report should be changed to include a formal statement proclaiming that the focus of the study shifted from evaluation of nontraditional educational programs to evaluation of all postsecondary educational programs.

- The reaction process should include proviso for broader critiquing. Additional groups should be invited to read and react to the Project Report. One such group, for instance, that should be included would be the CAEL Task Force on Quality Assurance.

- The report somehow should give greater emphasis to the concept of the student as an intelligent consumer.

- The COPA report should stand on its "own two feet" from the standpoint of philosophy and implementation as opposed to appearing to being overly dependent on the involvement of other professional groups or organizations that are interested in some of the same problems.

Report on Concurrent Session:
Nontraditional Graduate Degree-awarding
Institutions and Programs
(D.J. Herrman, Recorder)

I. Because of the special interest in and concern about the role of nontraditional education, at the graduate level, Paul Dressel was commissioned to do a separate report, Problems and Principles in the Recognition or Accreditation of Graduate Education. This report:

- Looked at all institutions included in the COPA project that had graduate programs, with an emphasis on doctoral-granting institutions.
- Considered student reactions to the doctoral programs.
- Studied all published statements on standards, criteria, and guidelines related to graduate education.

Preliminary drafts of the report were reviewed by a panel of experts.

II. Discussion of the report identified the following matters of concern:

- An apparent lack of specific attention to the needs of the adult learner (although it was pointed out that nontraditional programs primarily serve adult students, so this consideration was included by implication).
- An apparent disapproval of free-standing graduate programs. Among the criticisms:
  - -- They tend to have more problems.
  - -- They tend to be new, often founded by one person (with stability dependent upon the continued participation of that person).
  - -- They often appear to be treated more severely by accrediting agencies than are more established programs.
- The report appeared to base its comments primarily on programs related to traditional academic disciplines, whereas many nontraditional programs tend to be more related to various professions. There may be a problem of the research orientation vs. the practitioner orientation.
- Questions concerning the designation of nontraditional degrees.
- Difficulties involved in evaluating educational outcomes, including such problems as:

-- The need to examine some of the "sacred cows" (shibboleths) of traditional programs.

-- The lack of effective interrelationships among traditional disciplines.

. Recommendations:

-- Every precaution should be taken to prevent new accrediting criteria from becoming so structured as to destroy the diversity of institutions and programs.

-- COPA and/or some other appropriate organization should develop a clearinghouse for the sharing of ideas concerning accrediting criteria for nontraditional institutions and programs and outcomes evaluation of experiential learning.

. A general concern that came up repeatedly in the discussion was that the report represents a tremendous potential contribution to graduate education, and steps should be taken to insure appropriate follow-up. How do we keep the report from being put on the shelf?

Report on General Session:

I. It was agreed that the major purpose of accreditation is to assure educational quality and that it must achieve this purpose with all types of institutions and programs. There was strong support for the primary conclusion of the study -- that traditional and nontraditional education have much more in common than otherwise. As one discussant said, "We are dealing with problems of education, not problems of nontraditional education." The group also concurred that the study points to a shift in emphasis:

- From "traditional" institutions to all institutions.
- From a focus on processes and resources to an emphasis on educational outcomes.

II. Much of the discussion concerned the desirability of follow-up to the study. Among the actions planned are the following:

- All of the regional accrediting commissions are in the process of reviewing their standards, planning the training of volunteers, and planning self-study workshops.
- Grover Andrews and representatives of COPA are discussing with the American Council on Education the possible publication of a hardback book on the COPA project.
- Robert Ramsey, working on assignment with the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, will be developing a grant application for consideration by the regional associations and COPA. It would seek funding for an information/education/training program for institutional personnel and volunteers in accreditation, focusing on outcomes assessment.
- He also will be conducting a study of the state of the art of outcomes evaluation and preparing a statement on the development and support of nontraditional education.
- As a spin-off of the original project, the regional accrediting commissions are cooperating in a case study evaluation of free-time educational programs on selected military bases, under a contract with the Department of Defense.
- COPA also is planning a project on the evaluation and quality assessment of continuing education.

III. Among the group comments were the following:

- A very helpful document and a landmark in higher education.

- The report has given recognition to the fact that very excellent work has been and is being done in the name of nontraditional education.

- The group heartily endorses the recommendations on outcomes vs. process.

- COPA should involve trustees and state coordinating boards in follow-up, also state approving agencies, state licensing agencies, and federal agencies.

- A letter should be sent by COPA to the presidents of cooperating institutions.

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PARTICIPANTS

Assessing Nontraditional Education

April 6-7, 1979

Panelists:

Grover J. Andrews, Project Director
Associate Executive Secretary, Commission on Colleges
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
795 Peachtree St. NE
Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Kay J. Andersen
Executive Director
Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities
Western Association for Schools and Colleges
c/o Mills College, Box 9990
Oakland, California 94613

John Harris
Professor of Higher Education
Middle Tennessee State University
Murfreesboro, Tennessee 37130

Robert Kirkwood
Executive Director
Commission on Higher Education
Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
3624 Market Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104

Philip McCullough
Post-Doctoral Intern, Commission on Colleges
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
795 Peachtree Street, NE
Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Patricia Thrash
Associate Director
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
820 Davis Street
Evanston, Illinois 60201

Kenneth E. Young
President
The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation
Suite 760
One Dupont Circle, NW
Washington, DC 20036

Participants:

George L. Aguirre
Program Officer
Exxon Education Fund
111 West 49th Street
New York, New York 10020

Gloria Archer
Coordinator
Commission on Evaluation of Dietetic Education
American Dietetic Association
430 North Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611

Paul R. Betz
Associate Dean
Saint Joseph's University
54th Street and City Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19131

Sylvia E. Bowman
Special Assistant to the President for
External Degree Programs
Indiana University - External Degree Programs
1201 East 38th Street Suite 109A
Indianapolis, IN 46250

Martha Brownlee
Professional Assistant to Principal Civilian
Advisor on Navy Education and Training
Building 624 Code 00A1
Pensacola Naval Air Station
Pensacola, FL 32508

John R. Cavanaugh
Assistant Dean
School of Continuing Studies
University of New Hampshire
Durham, NH 03824

Charles Chambers
Staff Associate
The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation
Suite 760, One Dupont Circle, NW
Washington, DC 20036

Philip Chamberlain
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Walden University
2003 Sussex Drive
Bloomington, Indiana 47401

Robert H. Dougherty
Assistant Secretary
Commission on Accreditation
American Dental Association
Chicago, Illinois 60611

Marjorie Dugan
Coordinator of the Learning Laboratory
Community College of Philadelphia
34 South 11th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Arlon E. Elser
Program Director
W. K. Kellogg Foundation
400 North Avenue
Battle Creek, Michigan 49016

Warren D. Evans
Coordinator of Private and Professional
Institutions and Specialist for Chartering
Pennsylvania Department of Education
Box 911
Harrisburg, PA 17126

Harry F. Evarts
Director of Educational Services
American Management Association
135 West 50th Street
New York, N.Y. 10020

Verona H. Fonte
Dean for Academic Administration
Humanistic Psychology Institute
325 Ninth Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

Lawrence Friedrich
Assistant Chief
Accrediting Agency Evaluation Branch
Division of Eligibility and Agency Evaluation
United States Office of Education
Seventh and D Streets, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Thomas E. Furlong
Associate for Policy Analysis
Postsecondary Education
Florida Department of Education
Knott Building
Tallahassee, FL 32304

Sheila Gordon
Vice President
Council for the Advancement of Experiental Learning
Associate Dean, Division of Cooperative Education
LaGuardia Community College
31-10 Thomson Avenue
Long Island, NY 11101

Robert Hammond
Undergraduate Council
University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, CO 80639

D.J. Herrmann
Professor of Higher Education
School of Education
College of William and Mary
Williamsburg, VA 23185

H. Earl Heusser
Executive Director
National Association of Private, Nontraditional
Schools and Colleges
1129 Colorado Avenue, Suite 320
Grand Junction, CO 81501

Robert L. Holland
Dean
College of General Studies
George Washington University
2001 G St. NW
Washington, DC 20052

Frederick M. Hudson
President
Fielding Institute
3407 Los Pinos Drive
Santa Barbara, CA 93105

John H. Jacobson, Jr.
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Empire State College
2 Union Avenue
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866

Walter Johnson
Director of International Career Training
School of International Training
Experiment in International Living
Brattleboro, VT 05301

Kevin E. Kearney
Director
BIS External Degree Program
University of South Florida, FAO 105
Tampa, Florida 33620

John Kruger
President of the Graduate Council
University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, Colorado 80639

Kathleen Langley
Staff Associate
Accrediting Commission on Education
for Health Services Administration
Suite 420
One Dupont Circel, N.W.
Washington, D.C 20036

Martha W. McAvin
Associate for University Planning
State University of New York
University Plaza
Albany, New York 12246

Reverend William McInnes, S.J.
President
Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities
1717 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. Suite 402
Washington, D.C. 20036

Jerry W. Miller
Director
Division of Institutional Relations
American Council on Education
One Dupont Circle
Washington, D.C. 20036

Earl S. Mills
Dean of Continuing Education
Morris Harvey College
Charleston, W.V. 25304

George L. Nolfi
President
University Consultants, Inc.
45 Hancock Street
Cambridge, MA 02139

David M. Rafky
Research Coordinator
Heed University
1720 Harris Street
Hollywood, FL 33020

Robert R. Ramsey, Jr.
Educational Consultant
11411 Yeomans Drive
Richmond, Virginia 23233

Jerry Roseberry
Private College Standards
Georgia State Department of Education
156 Trinity Avenue Room 302
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Robert Ross
Associate Director CSAP
University of Northern Colorado
Greeley, CO 80639

Wimberly C. Royster
Dean of the Graduate School and
Coordinator of Research
University of Kentucky
359 Patterson Office Tower
Lexington, KY 40506

Jon Sager
Program Coordinator
University of the Redlands
White Head College
Redlands, CA 92373

G. Godfrey Sandeen
Dean
Century University
9100 Wilshire Boulevard
Beverly Hills, CA 90212

Alice Schell
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
Antioch University/Philadelphia
401 North Broad Street, Mezzanine
Philadelphia, PA 19108

Robert B. Sharp
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, REC
Chapman College
Orange, CA 92666

Albert Solomon
Vice President
Center for Degree Studies
Oak and Pawnee Street
Scranton, PA 18515

Rodney P. Stiefbold
Executive Dean
Walden University
801 Anchor Road Drive
Naples, Florida 33940

Steven M. Sundre
Assistant Professor/ACEHSA Accreditation Fellow
Ohio State University
Columbus, OH 43210

David E. Sweet
President
Rhode Island College
600 Mount Pleasant Avenue
Providence, RI 02908

Lee Transier
Director, Continuing Education
Temple University
Philadelphia, PA 19122

William H. Warren
Assistant Vice Chancellor
State-Wide Programs
University College
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

Raymond C. Watson, Jr.
President
Southeastern Institute of Technology
P.O. Box 1485
Huntsville, AL 35807

John T. Yantis
Director
Institute for Personal and Career Development
Central Michigan University
Mount Pleasant, MI 48859

Christopher P. Zachariadis
Executive Director
Clearinghouse for Community-based, Free-standing
Educational Institutions
1806 Vernon Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009